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ABSTRACT

The continuing small number of social work students who enter the concentration of social administration poses conditions that have potentially negative results for the field of social work. This study surveyed 131 graduate social work students at a large, public Midwestern university to determine the factors they considered important in making a choice of concentration, and at what point these choices were made. The findings indicated that almost 75 percent of the students made their choice prior to entering graduate school, and that 90 percent felt the most important factor influencing their decision was the need to obtain experience in clinical practice before entering social administration. Many of the students reported that they did not have sufficient information about social administration on which to base a decision about their choice of concentration. (Contains 26 references.) (Author/MDM)

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FACTORS CONSIDERED IMPORTANT BY STUDENTS IN MAKING A CHOICE OF SOCIAL WORK CONCENTRATION

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Abstract

The continuing small number of social work students who enter the concentration of social administration poses conditions that have potentially negative results for all associated with the field of social work. To inform a response to this trend, graduate social work students in a large Mid-Western university are surveyed to determine the factors they considered important in making a choice of concentration, and at what point these choices are made. The findings indicated that almost three-fourths of the students made there choice prior to entering graduate school. Almost 9 out of 10 of the students felt the most important factor was the need to obtain experience in clinical practice before entering social administration. This and other reasons for the decisions by students are assessed, and the implications for social work education and practice are identified.

FACTORS CONSIDERED IMPORTANT BY STUDENTS IN MAKING A CHOICE OF SOCIAL WORK CONCENTRATION

INTRODUCTION

While of some concern to the profession of social work, the continuing small number of students who choose to concentrate in social administration in graduate social work programs receives little attention in the literature. At the same time, individuals educated in disciplines other than social work are moving into positions as administrators in social service and other human service organizations which, at one time, were for the most part administered by social workers (Patti, 1984; Faherty, 1987). This change, although not formally assessed, could be assumed to have a profound impact on all practicing social workers. Administrators who are not social workers may well perceive the purposes of an organization differently and probably are more likely to employ other than social workers in direct service positions. (Patti, 1987, Kettner, et. al., 1990). If such assumptions are accurate, then the majority of social work students who are choosing to enter clinical/direct service, as well as those who enter practice as administrators, are affected by the declining number of potential positions that are available for them after graduation.

As a profession, social work has not fully appreciated nor correctly assessed the relative declining status of social administration. At a symposium on social work leadership for human service management held only a few years ago (Healy, Pine

and Weiner, 1989) a number of predictions were made (Battle, 1989) that appear to fly in the face of trends that have existed for some twenty years:

1. By the year 2000 the number of social work managers and executives will more than double. A much larger number will be trained by schools of social work.
2. By 1990 a system for certifying social work managers will be established and operational.
3. By the year 2000 a trend will be reversed and the society will be increasingly looking to our profession for executives to lead major human service systems." (p. 113)

Needless to say, these predictions have not come about, and the trends suggest that, at best, the education of social administrators will barely hold stable. Data collected annually by the Council on Social Work Education indicate that for the last fifteen years, the percentage of students who choose administration as their concentration in schools of social work has held steady at about 4-5 percent of the total full-time enrollment (CSWE, 1975-1990). Some authors (See, for example, Teicher, 1985; Neugeboren, 1986, Patti, 1987a) have attempted to assess why this situation exists. In a profession that in its early beginnings established schools of social work that often carried "Social Administration" in their titles, why has this part of social work not been able to increase the number of students choosing this concentration? (See Skidmore, 1990 for a succinct historical review of the development of social administration).

Social Workers as Administrators

Several authors have explored in depth and with insight the rationale for the existence of social workers as administrators. Patti (1987b) has convincingly argued that while education in other fields, e.g., public administration or business

administration, may well provide the student with needed management methods and techniques, - social workers are more likely also to bring an insight into the needs and problems of clients, what is fair in addressing those problems, and a commitment to client protection and benefit as the central obligation of the agency. He posits, and this writer fully agrees, that the social worker as administrator is more capable than individuals from other disciplines of connecting the means of service delivery to the ends of service delivery-client outcomes. This issue is further clarified by Neugeboren (1990) who identifies "...the stereotype that social work competence is only the area of direct practice," (p.53) and argues that social workers need to be seen as competent administrators as well as direct service practitioners. The problem of social workers being closed out of upper level administrative positions is criticized by Gummer and Edwards (1988) who suggest that schools should prepare students to enter mid-management positions.

There is little in the literature that reflects study of the student, prior to entering a social work graduate program, or, for that matter, after leaving a program. A notable exception is York, et al. (1990) who study congruence between the concentration chosen while in graduate school and the subsequent employment patterns of a group of social workers. One of their findings was "Almost all (95%) of the respondents employed in direct practice positions had been trained in this concentration but only one of the ten persons who were employed in administration had been trained in a congruent method." (p. 12, emphasis added). While there are a number of limitations to this small sample, it is nonetheless reflective of the pervasive notions within social work that direct practice experience is the preparation of choice for eventual entry into administrative practice and, as noted earlier, that what social work has to offer are clinical skills and administrative skills are best provided by others (Hart, 1984, Neugeboren, 1990).

Student Decision-Making

Students entering graduate programs of social work, whether experienced in social work or not, tend to have limited information and perceptions of the field and their career options. Most of these students are without experience in social work, have undergraduate degrees in fields other than social work, and, when they do have work experience, it is very limited or in fields other than social work (Schwartz and Datallo, 1990; current study). Yet it is on this information and these perceptions that students make significant decisions that impact their educational experience, their careers, and ultimately, the field of social work. To further explore this area of student decision-making, this current study intends to further the investigation of student choice by replicating and expanding the work of Schwartz and Datallo (1990) that explored why students in one graduate social work program chose not to enter social administration.

The replication of the Schwartz and Datallo study was based on a number of considerations. First is the need to assess their findings with a similar group of students, to define more sharply the variables involved in student decision-making and to move the exploratory process forward. The second consideration is the fact that the findings of these studies appear to lend themselves to possible immediate interventions to deal with the perceived problem faced by those concerned with social work administration. Finally, the exploration suggests a number of ways that the profession and social work education can be of assistance to students as they make decisions that effect their career paths and, ultimately, the profession and the individuals and organizations served

While the Schwartz and Datallo study investigated student decisions regarding what they termed a "Macro Specialization," this study examined student decision-

making in reference to one area of macro practice, i. e., Social Administration. The term "concentration" is used in both studies to describe the method of practice. In this instance, the program under study defined concentrations as clinical practice and social administration practice.

The research questions are:

1. When do students decide which concentration they will enter?
2. Do students who chose not to enter the social administration concentration give any consideration to entering that concentration?
3. What are the factors that influence students not to enter social administration and what is the relative importance of these factors?
4. Are the findings of M. Schwartz and Datallo (1990) study applicable to other student populations?

METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire was developed based on the work of Schwartz and Datallo (1990) that primarily used their questions about which concentration was selected by students and when they made this choice; those who had chosen the clinical concentration were questioned about whether they had considered choosing the social administration concentration. Participants were questioned about how important they considered a series of factors in their decision not to enter social administration. Each of these eight factors was to be rated on a five point scale ranging from 1-"not at all important" to 5-"extremely important." Participants were given the opportunity for open ended responses and these responses also are reported in the findings.

Two changes were made in the information requested in this study as compared to the Schwartz and Datallo study. In asking participants about the extent to which they had considered entering the social administration concentration, Schwartz and Datallo used a five point scale. This study employed a four point scale in order to encourage participants to more precisely evaluate the extent to which they had given consideration to this decision. This was done also in light of the findings of the Schwartz and Datallo study that employed only the two highest responses to this question as a means to identify those participants who had given serious consideration to entering social administration.

The other change in the questionnaire from the original study was to eliminate one of the factors (isolation from other students) in the list of those influencing the decision not to select social administration. This deletion was based on the finding that this factor was of little significance. (81 percent rated it not important, Schwartz and Datallo, 1990, p. 81). An additional factor was added (choosing social administration limits career flexibility) that appeared to have some importance in student decision making, based on the writers' observations. In addition, the current questionnaire obtained information which either was not requested by Schwartz and Datallo, or was not reported. The current study inquired about the age and gender of the respondent; the year in which the respondent received the undergraduate degree, and the field in which the degree was received, e.g., psychology, social work, history, nursing, etc. This additional information was added to explore issues that are considered relevant to student decision-making, i.e., knowledge about the field of social work and the gender of students who choose to enter social administration. This latter factor appeared to be particularly relevant in light of the traditional perception by some that administrative practice is male-oriented. The information on undergraduate degree is to explore some of the issues related to the knowledge base

of entering students, particularly the differences between those with social work degrees and those with degrees from other disciplines, and the impact of this knowledge base on decisions about which concentration to enter.

The questionnaire was given to all first year, full and part-time MSW students in a large, public university in the Midwest. The data were collected during the 1992-93 academic year. The students were in the second quarter of a regular six quarter, or two academic year program. The fact that the program is on a quarter system is significant, since it indicates many of the students, whose undergraduate degree is not in social work, had been exposed to social work courses and faculty for only ten weeks, and would be required within a month to six weeks to make a decision about which concentration they would enter. This point will be discussed more fully in the Findings section.

During the first quarter of the program, these students took a required foundation practice course which focused on work with individuals, families and groups; they were currently, in their second quarter, enrolled in a second required, foundation practice course which focused on organizations and communities. At about the mid-point of the second quarter, they are required to register for the following quarter, at which time they enroll in their first concentration course. It is at this point, approximately 15 weeks after they enter the program, that students must make a choice of the concentration courses they will take, i.e., clinical or social administration. While this choice is not irrevocable, nor does it completely eliminate the possibility of taking courses in both concentrations, the scheduling of courses, particularly required courses, makes it extremely difficult to take courses in both concentrations. (This raises the issue of the impact on student decision-making of the logistics of social work education, i.e., scheduling of classes and field, the structure of the curriculum,

including the length and frequency of classes, and the related demands placed on adult students. This is an area that deserves closer attention, but is beyond the scope of this study).

The questionnaire was given to all students enrolled in the five sections of a required class and was completed during the first session of the class. Participation was voluntary and no student refused. Identifying information was limited to age, gender, and undergraduate degree, so it is assumed that confidentiality was not of concern to respondents.

FINDINGS

Of the 131 students who responded to the questionnaire, 87.1 percent were women and 12.9 percent were men; the mean age was slightly older than 29, the modal age was 23 and the range was 22 to 54. Of the total, 109, or 83 percent were identified as full-time first year students, and the remainder were in part-time status. While information on race was not requested on the questionnaire, data from general information on the entering class indicated 7.5 percent were minority students.

Two-thirds (66 percent) had received their undergraduate degree within the last five years and of the total, 23.5 percent received undergraduate degrees in social work; 54.6 percent were in the social sciences; 11.8 percent were in the humanities; 9.2 percent had other professional degrees, e.g., nursing, education, and less than one percent had degrees in the sciences. Although not all this information was presented in the Schwartz and Datallo (1990) study, Table 1 presents some selected demographic characteristics of their study population and the population from the current study. Schwartz and Datallo (1990) indicate 11 percent of their sample identified themselves as having chosen the macro concentration, while a somewhat

larger percentage of the current study, 18.3 percent, chose the social administration concentration. It may also be significant that Schwartz and Datallo report 26 percent of their population who were in the clinical concentration indicated having considered the macro concentration. The current study reports a much larger percentage, almost half, who indicated some interest in the social administration concentration. This suggests the possibility that students who enter a clinical concentration may well have some interest in learning about administration, which is somewhat more specific than the generalized area of macro practice.

Table 1. Selected Characteristics from Schwartz and Datallo and Current Studies

Characteristic	Schwartz and Datallo	Current
N=	158	131
% Macro/Adm	11	18.3
% Micro Considered Macro/Adm.	26	49.5
% Women	* (a)	87.1
% Men	*	12.9
Mean Age	Under 30	29
% S.W. Undergrad Degree	*	23.5

* Information not given.
(a) Reported as predominantly female

Students were asked to indicate which concentration they intended to choose. Clinical was the choice of 71.8 percent of the students; 18.3 percent chose social administration, and 9.9 percent indicated they wished to enter some combination of concentrations.

In response to the question inquiring when they made the decision to enter their concentration of choice, 72.5 percent indicated they made the choice prior to entering the graduate program; 18.9 percent made the choice during the first quarter of the

program (they were then in the second quarter for full-time students;) 3.1 percent indicated they had made the choice during the current quarter, and 3.1 percent had not yet made a decision.

The remainder of the questions were directed only to those students who had decided to enter the clinical concentration or had not yet decided on their choice. A question inquired if they had ever considered entering the concentration in social administration, which was defined as including social planning and community organization. Of those students who had decided to enter the clinical concentration or had made no decision, 22.2 percent had never considered anything other than clinical; 38.2 percent considered social administration briefly; 32.3 percent considered it some, and 17.2 percent considered it seriously. Thus almost half of the students (49.5 percent) had given more than passing consideration (combination of the two categories of "some consideration" and "serious consideration") to the possibility of entering the social administration concentration.

Students were then asked to rate a series of eight factors in their decision not to enter social administration. These factors are the ones identified by Schwartz and Datallo, modified as described earlier, and are as follows:

* Preparation for social work licensure not helped by concentration in Social Administration.
* Wanted clinical experience first.
* Limited job opportunities with concentration in Social Administration.
* Limits flexibility in career opportunities.
* Limited field placement opportunities.
* Limited range of course offerings in Social Administration.
* Lower quality of faculty teaching in Social Administration.
* Lack of information about Social Administration Concentration.
* Other (Please specify.)

Participants were asked to rate each factor on a Likert-type scale of 1-not at all important, 2-little importance, 3-important, 4-very important, and 5-extremely important. Space was provided to indicate other factors. Table 2 shows each of the factors, the mean score and rank for each factor in both the Schwartz and Datallo study (1990) and this current study.

Table 2. Mean Scores and Rank of Decision Factors by Study

	Schwartz & Datallo		Current	
Decision Factor	Mean Score	Rank	Mean Score	Rank
Clinical Experience First	3.70	1	4.00	1
Prep for Licensure	3.70	2	1.90	5 (Tie)
Job Market	2.80	3	2.20	4
Lack of Info	2.60	4	2.80	2
Field Placement	2.30	6	1.90	5 (Tie)
Courses	2.00	5	1.90	5 (Tie)
Faculty	1.80	7	1.60	8
Isolation	1.70	8	*	*
Limits Career Flexibility	*	*	2.40	3

* Item not included in study.

The current study clearly demonstrates the importance placed by students in the perceived need to first obtain clinical practice experience before considering administrative practice. It is ranked first with a mean score of 4 out of a possible 5 in this study, and was first in the Schwartz and Datallo study, with a mean score of 3.7 out of a possible 5. The current study shows the second most important factor (mean score of 2.8) as lack of information about the social administration concentration, with the factor, "Social administration limiting career flexibility", following closely behind in third rank, with a mean score of 2.4. Of moderate importance, ranked fourth with a mean score of 2.2, is the factor of "Limited job opportunities in social administration." Three factors tied for fifth place, with a mean score of 1.9 each, and are of relative unimportance in the decision-making process: "Limited field placements in social

administration"; "Limited course offerings", and, in strong contrast to the finding of the Schwartz and Datallo study, where it had a mean score of 3.7 and was ranked second, "Preparation for social work licensure." The factor that ranked last with a mean score of 1.6 (also ranked last with a mean score of 1.8 in Schwartz and Datallo) was the factor, "Lower quality of faculty in social administration." (This might prove of some moderate, transient comfort to those teaching in administration!)

A more detailed look at the responses by students to which factors are important in their decision-making is provided in Table 3. Almost nine out of ten (89.2 percent) of the students indicate a belief central to their decision is that one should first obtain clinical experience prior to entering administrative practice. This factor also is the only one that is clearly considered "extremely important," having been so designated by four out of every ten students. The question of why this is believed, while not the focus of this study, deserves attention. The salience of the lack of information about administrative practice is evident in over half the students (55.6 percent) indicating this factor was "important" or "very important" in their decision. While not ranking as high overall as other factors, the factors of the potential job market for administrators (22.5 percent indicate "important") and the consideration that the administrative concentration would limit career flexibility (31.7 percent indicate "important") tend to support and reinforce the importance of the lack of information held by students about administration in social work, and the belief that "clinical before administrative" is the appropriate educational and career choice.

Table 3. Percentage of Respondents Considering Decision Factors Important, Very Important, and Extremely Important

Decision Factor	% Important	% Very Important	% Extrm. Important	Cumulative %
Clinical Experience First	18.60	29.40	41.20	89.20
Prep for Licensure	11.90	8.90	0.00	20.80
Job Market	22.50	6.90	4.90	34.30
Lack of Info	30.30	25.30	7.10	62.70
Field Placement	10.90	7.90	0.00	18.80
Courses	17.00	5.00	0.00	22.00
Faculty	10.40	1.00	0.00	11.40
Limits Career Flexibility	31.70	12.90	4.00	48.60

In response to the question about the importance of factors, one out of four of the students (25.9 percent) also checked the "other" category and wrote in a response. These responses were content analyzed and fell into five categories. Almost half (47 percent) of those responding to the other category indicated that they believed their personal attributes (usually not specified) were more suited to the clinical area. Of the remainder of this group of respondents, many attempted to emphasize the factors listed in the questionnaire; lack of information and need for direct service experience; in addition, 8.8 percent indicated they already had a business background (undergraduate degree or experience) and 8.8 percent felt that social administration offered them a limited career opportunity.

The final section of the questionnaire asked for general comments and 20.6 percent of the respondents used this opportunity. These responses were content analyzed and fell into four major categories. A number of students (18.5 percent) used this opportunity to indicate their displeasure that the curriculum did not allow them to combine both clinical and social administration content; 22.2 percent reinforced the position that they did not have enough knowledge about social administration on which to base a decision; a number (18.5 percent) again expressed the notion that

they should first obtain clinical knowledge and experience and then move into administrative practice. Finally, some of the students (11.1 percent) indicated that they believed that administration could be learned "on the job."

ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

Subsequent to the administration of the questionnaire during the Winter Quarter, a group structured interview was held with those students who, in fact, enrolled in the first social administration course in the following (Spring) Quarter. This information is provided to gain further insights on the findings of the current study. There were a total of 27 students in this class, 24 of whom were in the social administration concentration and three who identified themselves as being in the clinical concentration, taking the first Social Administration course as an elective. The mean age of this group was 29.6 years, with the modal age being 22. Of the group, 74 percent were women and 26 percent were men; 81 percent had undergraduate degrees in fields other than social work. When asked about when they had decided to enter social administration, 74 percent indicated they had decided prior to entering school; 14.8 percent had decided during the first quarter, and 11.1 percent had decided during the second quarter. The students further indicated that 41 percent of them had some assistance in making the decision to enter the social administration concentration. Of some interest also, were the statements by 30 percent of these students that they had changed their minds after initially having decided to enter the clinical concentration or had been leaning in that direction.

Some information that had not been obtained from the questionnaire administered to all first year students related to the employment history of the students in the first social administration course. In response to a question about whether they had worked in a social work or related position prior to entering school, 55.6 percent

responded that they had, while the remaining 44.4 percent had never worked in such a job. The employment history of students is another area deserving examination, particularly as it impacts students' perceptions of the field of social work, and their educational and career decisions.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study clearly support some of the findings of Schwartz and Datallo (1990) but not all. As described by Schwartz and Datallo (1990), this current Study also found that students (seven out of ten) espouse the notion that all social workers should have direct service/clinical experience prior to entering practice in social administration (ranked first among decision factors in both studies.) Exactly where this idea comes from is not clear, other than it has an element of being self-evident, i.e., administrators should be aware of the tasks and difficulties faced by direct service workers (the need to "be in the trenches" argument.) This notion is probably generally supported by practitioners as well as educators, as evidenced by the almost total lack of questioning of this position in the literature, and, as Schwartz and Datallo (1990) observe, has "evolved into an ideology" in social work (p. 85). One may well assume that this notion has achieved the status of myth in the culture of social work. The writers, with the additional support found in this study, strongly endorse the recommendation of Schwartz and Datallo that "...an empirical examination of this issue is necessary and should address the impact of direct practice training and experience on a variety of macro functions..." (p. 92). It is clearly not only practice that is impacted by this untested assumption, but social work education as well.

Related to the above issue of "clinical before administrative," is the desire by many students to combine clinical and social administration curricula. While some programs structure their curriculum in this way, others "encourage," some "allow"

students through various scheduling mechanisms to take courses both in clinical practice and in social administration practice. The role of "generalist" practice or "integrated" practice, in contrast to the "specialized" approach is once again introduced. Thus, the issue has impact on both social work practice and on social work education. In many ways, the questions of whether social workers should first have experience in direct practice before attempting to be administrators, and, is it educationally sound to combine direct practice and administration curricula, reflect the long-standing debates in social work about the professional focus of attention, i.e., the individual or the larger system. This may well be one more reflection of the lack of an adequate resolution of that issue.

Contrary to the finding by Schwartz and Datallo (1990) that students have information about the macro sequence, many of the students in the current Study indicate they do not have sufficient information about social administration on which to base a decision about their choice of concentration. This finding is further supported by the fact that three out of four of these students enter social work from another field.

The current Study finds that almost three out of four of the students indicate they made their choice about which concentration to enter prior to entering graduate school. Schwartz and Datallo suggest that large numbers of students "window shop" (p. 93) upon entering graduate school, but ultimately enter clinical practice. At this point it is not possible to suggest any further reasons based on the data why the two studies found these differences among the students, or the differences noted in Table 1. Conjecture might suggest it is related to a number of factors, including the reputation of the program involved, the geographical area from which students are drawn, the undergraduate education of the students, or the sources used by students to assist in their decision-making. It points, however, to the importance in future work of identifying student characteristics and curricular structure characteristics, and perhaps

attempting to determine any connecting links between these characteristics and the choices made.

In the matter of assisting students in their decision-making and, at the same time, recruiting for social administration, a number of the findings appear to have immediate relevance. In the case of this particular institution, the finding that students indicated they did not have sufficient information about social administration to make an informed decision about which concentration to enter, prompted an attempt to intervene in the process of decision making. Coupled with the finding that students were making their choices prior to entering school, the institution, during the summer before the students' first class, communicated by letter with each student with an offer for the student to contact a specific faculty member, either by telephone or in a personal interview. This contact was for the purpose of providing information about the social administration concentration or answering any question the student might have about the concentrations offerings. This led to a significant number of student contacts, (approximately 15-20 percent of all incoming students) both by telephone and in conferences. An initial assessment of this effort strongly suggests a connection between this effort and the subsequent increase in students choosing to enter the Social Administration Concentration. The number of students choosing Social Administration nearly doubled over the average number of students in the previous five years. (It is intended that this effort will be reported at a later date).

While some differences are found between this population of students and that studied by Schwartz and Datallo (1990), the differences, while significant, do not blur the themes that emerge from both studies. As institutions make difficult choices about the allocation of diminishing resources, they must seek data from a wider field of stakeholders. It is clear that information must be sought from students about their decision making in regard to career choices (this may well be just as important for choices about which field they enter, e.g., mental health, child welfare, health, etc., as it

is for which concentration they choose). Whether students need information to help in their decision making may well vary from school to school, depending on a number of factors, including the number of students who enter graduate social work programs from other fields; the amount and type of work experience the student has prior to entering graduate school; at what point students are required to make choices about concentrations (if such choices are required;) and the nature of the early courses and faculty to which students are exposed. But, in any event, it is relatively easy to ask students directly if additional information if needed, and, if so, to provide it. This information is important, not necessarily as a means to "recruit" students away from direct practice to administrative practice, but as a means to help students to move into that area of social work practice in which they have an interest and in which they may be most competent.

The more complex question raised by both studies centers around the relationship of direct practice to administrative practice, i.e., must social workers first practice as clinicians before entering administration? Should students entering a social administration concentration be required to have direct service experience? Future research should explore what is the predominant belief about the answer to those questions among social work practitioners and educators, why this belief is held and, perhaps most important, is there empirical evidence to support these beliefs. The results of that research could have significant impact, not only on the problematic issues facing social work administration, but on the structure of social work education and on the allocation of resources, during these particularly troubling times.

What becomes apparent is the importance of learning more about the deciding factors and the process by which students make curricular and career choices. For a profession which prides itself on involving those who are affected by decisions, and on involving the consumers of services, where the literature often speaks of

empowerment, social work education has done little to ask students about some of the critical questions that effect their academic careers and, later, their professional careers. In the long run, these decisions shape the characteristics of social work practitioners and the nature of social work practice.

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